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Can a Niche Market Captive Wildlife Facility Place a Low Profile Region on the Tourism Map?

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ABSTRACT

Rural areas often present special problems in terms of tourism development owing to a lack of product, market access and infrastructure. This paper presents the findings of a case study focusing on the central southern wheatbelt of Western Australia, in an area known as Dryandra Country. This area embarked on a tourism development initiative centered on a woodland and its wildlife tourism product. The aim was to develop the woodland as an internationally significant nature based destination. This was attempted partly through constructing a captive wildlife tourism facility, Barna Mia, housing some rare local fauna. Research during 2003 found that, while Barna Mia provided a highly satisfying experience for its visitors, there was little indication that it was progressing toward the international tourism icon status as intended. Further efforts to develop a coordinated regional product also appeared to be slow owing to factors relating to management of Barna Mia and tourism development in the wider region. This paper explores the issues as they were in 2003 and identifies key factors influencing the progress of tourism development in a low profile region.

KEY WORDS: captive wildlife tourism, regional tourism product, government/community relations

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Introduction

Development of tourism attractions is often seen as a means toward counteracting the economic decline that rural and regional areas are currently experiencing (Seaton, 1999, Knowd, 2001, Prideaux, 2002). Parr (1999) referred to this as ‘the depressed area problem’, where once prosperous regions have failed to adjust to significant socio-economic changes. In order to recover from depression, such areas are seen to need new or more diversified economic activity. Seeking to establish some form of viable tourist attraction is one response to such circumstances.

Tourism attractions are the things that people will travel to visit because of the perceived significance of the experience or place (Leiper, 1990, Jacobsen et al., 2002). Difficulties in developing tourism in regional locations are likely to be associated with minimal tourism related infrastructure, a lack of obvious tourism attractions and small resident and business populations. Ironically these are the very factors that often stimulate the quest to attract tourists. While inadequate supporting infrastructure may be dealt with given motivation, time and money, the lack of tourist attractions may be a more difficult issue to address.

When discussing the low level of tourism activity in Kansas, an agriculturally dominated state in the USA, Hsu, et al (2004) claimed that it is, ‘... not what a destination has, but more importantly how it utilises its resources.’ (p121). Hsu et al (2004) approached this concept from the angle of marketing existing opportunities to a very specific market segment interested in the type of landscape prevalent in Kansas (which is 90% open farming land). Hsu et al (2004) found that common attitudes and perceptions of Kansas as an undesirable holiday destination were very difficult to change in the absence of any obvious change in what the region had to offer. Because depressed rural areas often have limited funds for tourism development, promotion of Kansas as a holiday destination relied heavily on the local residents promoting the region by word of mouth to friends and family. Such a method requires active and positive community involvement and would seem to access a very narrow market in terms of potential tourists.

Seaton (1999) described a different approach to encouraging tourism in areas with little obvious appeal. He focused on a strategy whereby a large quantity of commercial and defunct public properties in a rural town were converted into retail outlets for antique and second hand books. The concentration of outlets selling old books created a critical mass of a single type of retail outlet that enabled the town to be packaged as a unique tourism destination. This concept involves the *creation* and promotion of a niche market *attraction* rather than seeking to promote sparse *existing* attributes to an existing minor market likely to be attracted to areas with a low tourism profile. That is, rather than attempting to change attitudes to the existing destination, something new and unusual was added to increase the appeal of the location to tourists.

While this paper does not specifically seek to debate the concept, setting out to create a tourism nucleus links back to the comments of Parr (1999) regarding establishment of growth poles. Focusing investment on a specific project or concept in an attempt to increase tourism visitation to a region, and thus improve socio-economic fortunes, typifies the growth pole strategy. Parr (1999) observed that the ‘instances where the strategy was implemented ... [successfully] are few and far between.’ (p1196). This is attributed to the misguided assumption that establishing physical infrastructure will automatically translate into a socio-economic context and vis versa. Successful growth pole strategy implementation (such as building a tourism oriented structure) relies on specific conditions without which the intended benefits will not manifest.

Prideaux (2002) highlighted four factors that are particularly important for the successful establishment and sustainable operation of attractions. These are summarised as: location factors, community support for tourism, management of the attraction and supporting tourism infrastructure in the surrounding region. Location factors relate to accessibility of the attraction in terms of transport costs and, we assume, time. Higher transport costs may reduce the number or likelihood of tourists visiting the region. Community support is generally a requirement for success of a tourist attraction (Howell, 1987, Hsu et al., 2004). This may be in the form of low cost or in-kind contributions that are particularly important in low profile areas. Management of the attraction must account for the limitations inherent in regional areas with little tourism activity and make reasonable judgments as to the potential demand for the attraction, its capacity and the subsequent contribution to the region based on sound knowledge of the target market (Prideaux, 2002). This may be easier said than done as many

low profile regional areas are characterised by a lack of tourism related data. Lack of data means any market analysis must be based on conjecture and comparative estimates. Finally, the presence of supporting infrastructure also plays a significant part in the success of tourism activities. Infrastructure such as accommodation, transport and tourism oriented businesses and services all function to support the success of a tourist attraction. The irony of much of this is that regional areas seeking to use tourism as the panacea for economic and social woes are generally characterized by the lack of such factors.

The Wheatbelt of Western Australia is a region, with the exception of some key locations, that has a generally low tourism profile (see Figure 1). The region is almost entirely reliant on grain and sheep production as an economic activity. Consequently the wheatbelt region is subject to the widely varying fortunes of the agricultural market as well as the unpredictability of the natural elements' influence on yield and subsequent revenue. Its character means the wheatbelt in Western Australia is experiencing a steady economic and social decline as populations migrate to larger centers of economic activity and more opportunity, typical of the 'depressed area' concept defined by Parr (1999). Local governments and community groups faced with this decline are increasingly turning to tourism development as a means of diversifying the economic base of their regions.

This case study is based on a group of local government areas (LGAs) in the southern sub-region of the Western Australian Wheatbelt (Figure 1). The LGAs banded together, with the active participation of the State government agencies of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC), and attempted to increase tourism activity in their region. The core components of this effort were the installation of a unique attraction, named Barna Mia, and repackaging the image of the region.

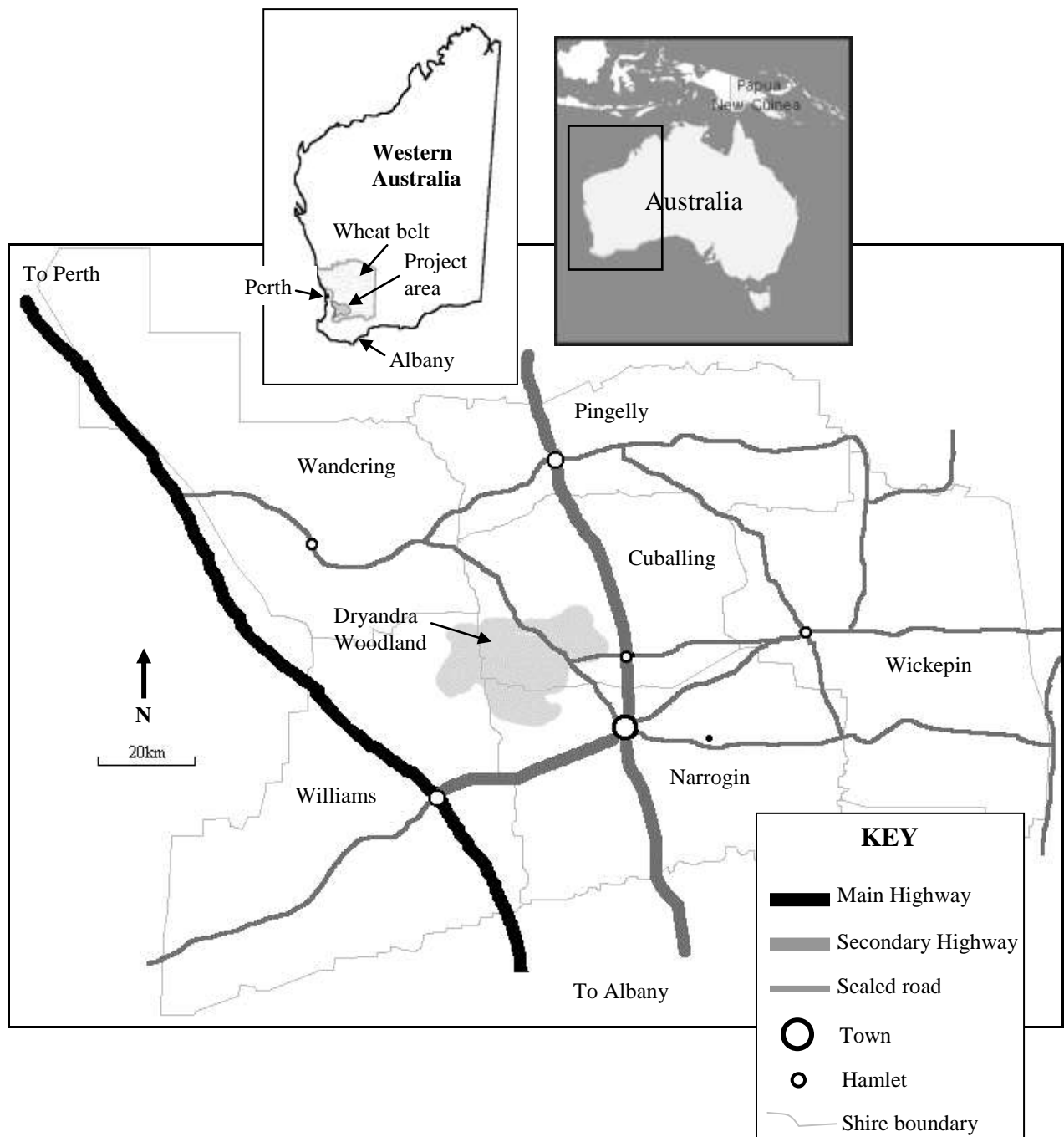


Figure 1. Map of project area showing location of Dryandra Woodland and orientation of Local Government Areas.

The key ‘players’ in this case study are seven rural LGAs; CALM, the State Government agency responsible for managing natural areas in Western Australia; WDC, responsible for economic development in the wider region; a significant area of remnant vegetation (Dryandra Woodland) and; up to 18 endangered marsupial species. The marsupials are not directly involved in the political dynamics but the viewing enclosure within which they reside

is. Barna Mia, a facility constructed in 2002, forms the back drop to the seven LGAs and CALM cooperating to develop a tourism product for the region. Put another way, Barna Mia was viewed as the keystone to development of a tourism attraction that itself can then be the center of tourism planning and development in the LGAs.

The study explores the various community, management, infrastructure and location factors that played a role in the development and operation of Barna Mia as the intended tourism icon for the region. This includes the eventual withdrawal of two LGAs and the renaming of the group as 'Dryandra Country'.

Method

This article is based on research conducted during 2003. Information was gathered from previous reports, including relevant past surveys, personal stakeholder interviews and the scant tourism research previously conducted in the study location. Community members from each LGA were interviewed using a semi structured discussion format. Interviews gathered information regarding tourism development and how Dryandra Woodland and Barna Mia were perceived to fit into the wider tourism product. Further, LGA executive officers (heads of LGA bureaucracy), state government agency representatives, tourism operators and members of tourism related non-government organisations were interviewed. This enabled a multifaceted view of tourism development in the region to be constructed.

The interview data was then supplemented through a community discussion forum, held at the conclusion of the research period. Attending this forum were all of those previously interviewed as well as some further community representatives. The forum enabled discussion between the various stakeholders in terms of tourism development of the region and the role of Dryandra Woodland and Barna Mia. Observation of political relationships between various individuals and groups was also made by the researchers that led to further insight and confirmation of interview and forum data.

In conjunction with the interviews, 85 visitors to Barna Mia were surveyed using self administered written forms. The survey sought to ascertain the satisfaction levels of visitors to Barna Mia and the associated reasons for their satisfaction response. Questionnaires included satisfaction scales and opportunities for open-ended comments relating to

satisfaction levels indicated. An 'overall' satisfaction rating was requested for the experience as a whole. This was followed by requests to indicate satisfaction with the various distinct aspects of the experience. The forms were made available to visitors at every Barna Mia tour over the region's peak visitation period between April and September. During this period, about 800 visitors toured the facility. The data were entered verbatim into an excel spreadsheet for analysis. Given the nature of the data, simple statistical procedures were used, such as means and frequencies, in the analysis of the data. Written responses were grouped according to common themes while satisfaction ratings were averaged. This provided an insight into the visitor experience of Barna Mia as a captive wildlife tourism facility.

The case study, incorporating as it did a variety of methods, was considered ideal in this low profile, sparsely populated region to uncover the politics of community cooperation. The captive wildlife facility, Barna Mia, took on icon status to the communities involved and thus became the focus of their attempts to develop a inter-Shire organization to promote tourism.

Readers should keep in mind that the study was conducted during the first year of operation of the wildlife viewing facility. This means that it may not have achieved its full potential although observation about its management enabled insight into its continued performance. Information was gathered from official representatives of government organisations and community groups with no input from the general public (not part of an organization). It was assumed that as the representatives were also part of the study area community, they had good knowledge of community sentiments. Finally, the Barna Mia visitor response results are based on a relatively small number of completed questionnaires. While they may not be statistically representative, the consistency of the responses over the six months of surveying supports the conclusions drawn.

The Location

The Western Australian Wheatbelt region as a whole covers approximately 156,000 km² and has a residential population of about 71,000 (Austats, 2003). The LGAs included in this study cover about 9080 km² with a total residential population of 9022. The LGAs have few immediately obvious tourism attractions, minimal tourism oriented infrastructure or services and virtually no tourism data specific to the area. The major travel routes connecting the coastal state capital, Perth (to the northwest) with coastal centers to the south bypass the

LGAs such that very little ‘through’ traffic is apparent. Thus, the study area is a classic example of a community suffering rural decline owing to an unreliable and narrow economic base.

Narrogin is one of two LGAs in the region with a town council surrounded by a shire council. The town has a residential population five times that of the shire within its 13km². Although Narrogin Shire residents identify strongly with their farming identity, they still use the town as their facilities and services center. Thus, for the purposes of this report, the town and shire of Narrogin will be combined and referred to simply as Narrogin. In addition, as the remaining five LGAs have relatively small populations and are experiencing similar issues in terms of sustainability and tourism development, they will be referred to collectively.

Table 1: Local government areas and relative population sizes originally included in the project area.

Local Government Area	Population (2001 census)	% of Total Population
Cuballing	685	7.6%
Narrogin (shire and town)	5281	58.5%
Pingelly	1122	12.4%
Wandering	318	3.5%
Wickepin	716	7.9%
Williams	900	10.0%
Total Population	9022	100%

Narrogin is the regional center for the adjacent resource poor shires and is the dominant local government stakeholder with regards to tourism planning and development. Narrogin’s role as a regional government service and retail center has provided a buffer against the worst effects of the agricultural economic decline experienced in the region. This also resulted in Narrogin acting as a population sponge for its region. People in neighbouring shires move into the regional center for better access to facilities and services. Subsequently, Narrogin Town has experienced at least a slower rate of decline than its neighbouring shires owing to its broader economic base and role as a government service center while the remaining shires are still primarily reliant on agriculture (Tonts & Black, 2002). This is evident in the

population of the town of Narrogin slowing its decline to a near steady state between 1996 and 2003 while the remaining shires continued to lose residents (mostly youth) to the larger centers (Austats, 2003). This history has shaped the relationship between the LGAs within the project area and their current fortunes, with most of the LGAs seeking a way out of their decline through tourism development while the town of Narrogin seems to have a lesser incentive owing to its regional center status.

An evaluation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) by tourism development and community representatives during 2002 in Pingelly and Narrogin highlighted a lack of interest in tourism development by the general community (Sanders, 2002a, 2002b). This may be a kind of catch 22 situation in which the absence of tourism oriented activity stifles interest in its development. Perhaps the lack of interest apparent in Narrogin is a function of the already diversified economic base acting as a cushion against the decline in agricultural returns in the region. What ever the reason for the lack of interest, the absence of wider community support for tourism development may potentially act to limit the success of any initiatives in the region.

The Attraction

The seven local government areas are located within close proximity to a unique and extensive cluster of remnant native bushland blocks known as Dryandra Woodland. Most of the Wheatbelt's remnant vegetation pockets are no more than a few isolated hectares of severely degraded habitat (Hobbs, 2003). For this reason, Dryandra Woodland stands out as an unusually large area of native vegetation in the wheatbelt region. The woodland is actually a group of 17 closely clustered remnant 'blocks' connected by 'corridors' of native vegetation along fence lines and roads that collectively cover about 28,000 ha (~70,000 acres). The largest of the remnant blocks is 12000 ha (~30,000 acres), many times the size of the average for the wheatbelt region. Its size and location within an agricultural landscape has established Dryandra Woodland as a refuge for native fauna and flora populations unable to live in the surrounding cleared areas. As Moncreiff (1998a) noted, '[Dryandra Woodland is] ... the single most important area for conservation and recreation in the ... wheatbelt region of Western Australia'. While Dryandra Woodland was identified as a potentially significant tourism asset by both CALM and the seven local governments, a study by Moncrieff (1998)

found the woodland was underutilized, with a narrow range and low number of tourists contributing very little to the local shires in terms of economic benefits.

As the state conservation agency, CALM has sole jurisdiction over Dryandra Woodland. CALM's mandate clearly states that it is primarily responsible for the management of the 'natural estate' in Western Australia for conservation purposes (CALM, 2000). Involvement of other interests, including local governments, in planning and management of natural areas occurs entirely at CALM's discretion. In the late 1990s a CALM officer initiated a co-operative arrangement between the conservation agency and stakeholders within the seven LGAs. This arrangement was part of an initiative to develop a tourism planning framework for Dryandra Woodland based on the Tourism Optimisation Management Model (TOMM). The intent was to ensure responsible tourism development while maximising positive benefits for stakeholders through a community based forum. As part of applying the TOMM framework to Dryandra, the Dryandra Woodland Focus Group (DWFG) was formed. The DWFG included representatives from CALM, the local governments, the chambers of commerce, Wheatbelt Development Commission (a State government agency) and tourism development interest groups. All members were involved on a voluntary basis. The DWFG was conceived as a point of contact between CALM, as the sole manager of Dryandra Woodland, and the representatives of stakeholders from the communities that hoped to benefit from tourism development centered on the woodland.

The fundamental aim of the DWFG was to increase tourism spending in the region surrounding Dryandra Woodland (Dryandra Woodland Focus Group, 1999). This was to be achieved by first defining long term objectives relating to the identification of key tourism assets and opportunities and how best to co-ordinate the region in terms of creating a viable and sustainable tourism product (Moncrieff, 1998a). The wildlife tourism opportunities within Dryandra Woodland were the primary focus of this process. This manifested in the development of a captive wildlife 'tourist facility', later to be named Barna Mia. Barna Mia was intended as a 'value adding' project that would enable tourists to see rare animals they would normally not easily see in the wild. This facility was also intended to be a wildlife tourism icon for the seven LGAs and establish Dryandra Woodland as an internationally significant wildlife tourism destination.

The development of Barna Mia was based on dual purposes; it was to serve as a catalyst for increasing tourism numbers and associated economic benefits for the shires while also serving as a public education and promotion facility for CALM (CALM, 2001). This reflected the two primary philosophies operating behind the DWFG. One strand consisted of CALM as an agency focused on nature conservation and public education as decreed by its legal mandate. CALM had been operating a feral predator extermination program in conjunction with a native animal breeding program. The two programs had successfully increased the size of certain rare marsupial populations in the woodland. CALM sought to capitalize on the potential afforded by these rare and charismatic animals (such as the Bilby) through the development of an attraction centered on the breeding program itself. In this context, Barna Mia - the public relations interface - was constructed for the purpose of educating tourists, using close encounters with some of the rare species being bred for reintroduction. This was a means of raising public awareness about wildlife conservation and the profile of CALM as an agency successfully carrying out its conservation mission.

The second strand on which the Barna Mia was to function related to the perceived benefits of increasing tourist numbers visiting Dryandra Woodland and the surrounding area.. The charismatic nature of the rare marsupials coupled with the unique design of Barna Mia – the tourism icon - was seen as a catalyst for increasing tourist numbers in the region. More tourists was equated with beneficial ‘spin offs’ for nearby businesses (Moncrieff, 1998b). For example, the requirement for night time tours to view the strictly nocturnal marsupials is seen to require at least an over night stay. This was seen as a means toward encouraging visitors to use the accommodation and other facilities in the surrounding area (Moncrieff, 1998b, CALM, 2001). It may be reasoned that increasing numbers of visitors to the woodland potentially compromises CALM’s function as a nature conservation agency in charge of the most significant ecological remnant in the wheatbelt. The two fundamental philosophies upon which Barna Mia was conceived would arguably lead to the issues regarding its management and operation.

Barna Mia the Tourism Facility

Barna Mia’s value adding goal in relation to the Dryandra Woodland experience was to be achieved using three approaches. Firstly, the facility was built to house some very rare and locally extinct nocturnal marsupial species. These Barna Mia tenants are unlikely to be seen

by tourists in the wild owing to their nocturnal habits, small size and generally shy nature. The guaranteed opportunity to see rare animals with a definite ‘cuteness factor’ was considered a sure fire tourist attraction. Secondly, Barna Mia was designed in a distinctive manner to complement the surrounding landscape. The facility has a uniquely design visitor centre and also allows tourists to view free ranging, rare marsupials in a naturalistic setting with no barriers between the visitors and the animals. Thirdly, the experience itself was planned to ensure visitors where guaranteed close encounters with most of the animal species in the enclosure. There is a strong emphasis on wildlife conservation education using guided tours and small tour groups of 15 persons or less. A description of the facility and experience follows.

Barna Mia is a 2.5ha enclosure with an architecturally designed visitor center. The enclosure is surrounded by electrified, vermin proof fencing to keep feral predators out and the captive fauna in. The visitor center is incorporated into the fence line and acts as the gateway into the enclosure; animal feed preparation facility; educational center; merchandise sales area; and end of tour snacks and drinks venue. At the time of the survey, the facility housed five native fauna species involved in a CALM breeding and re-introduction program in Dryandra Woodland. Barna Mia was built and operated by CALM, as a means of allowing tourists to view the rare fauna involved in the breeding program that is primarily carried out in a much larger (20ha) enclosure nearby. Barna Mia is located a relatively remote, undisclosed section of Dryandra Woodland and is not sign posted. This was intended to minimise the risk of vandalism and unsolicited public visitation.

A tour of Barna Mia involves several distinct stages. All tours are conducted at night to view the strictly nocturnal habits of the animals. Groups of visitors meet the CALM guide at a location in Dryandra Woodland known as Old Mill Dam. From there, the guide leads the visitors in a convoy of cars through the woodland (on gravel roads) to the actual facility, about 7km away. On arrival, the guide leads the group into the visitor center. The visitors are seated in a open plan area and the guide presents a 45 minute description of the history of Dryandra Woodland, the fox eradication program, the breeding program and Barna Mia itself. The presentation is followed by a walk through the enclosure. The guided walk incorporates a defined walk trail loop of packed sand through the enclosure with four “feeding stations”. The trail is about 300 meters long with the feeding stations being about 50 meters apart. The

feeding stations are small clearings adjacent to the path with log seating for a small group of visitors.

During the guided walk, the animals are fed fresh chopped fruit and feed pellets by the guide in order to attract them to the visitor groups. Visitors take part in this process by placing the trays of food allocated to them by the guide in the clearings. The guide then points out the animals using a spotlight with a red filter (to minimize disruption of the animals' night vision). This process is repeated at each of the four feeding stations. On return to the building, visitors are provided with a hot drink and a snack. There is time to browse the available merchandise or chat with the guide before visitors make their own way back to their night accommodation.

The design characteristics and tour experience combine to form a theoretically ideal captive wildlife tourism experience. Tribe (2001) suggested that captive wildlife tourism may be most effective if it incorporates opportunities for interactive experiences both between tourists and animals and between tourists and guides. He also inferred that removing barriers between visitors and captive wildlife can function as a popular draw card. This ideally should take place in a setting that simulates the animal's natural habitat. In addition, Dengate (1993) identified education with a strong conservation message as an important component of appealing captive wildlife tourism products. The ideal captive wildlife attraction also has an emphasis on conservation of species by preserving specimens in captivity where survival in the wild is threatened with the potential for reintroduction or restocking of depleted non-captive populations (Shackley, 1996; Tribe, 2001). Thus the ideal captive wildlife tourism facility incorporates conservation and education with the opportunity for interaction with rare, charismatic animals in a naturalistic setting. Barna Mia incorporates all of these aspects in its design. Expectations were high regarding its success as a means of attracting large numbers of tourists.

The Dream and the Reality

While the design of Barna Mia was theoretically ideal, the social, political and geographical environment into which it was placed was not. The unique character of Barna Mia was to bring Dryandra Country into focus as a desirable tourism destination. This was envisaged in the form of increased numbers of domestic and international tourists visiting Dryandra Woodland and spending their holiday money in the surrounding shires as part of the predicted 'spin offs' for the host community (Moncrieff, 1998b). After all, the original concept of Barna Mia was as a means toward improving the contribution of Dryandra Woodland as a tourism destination to its surrounding communities. However, an over estimation of what Barna Mia was designed to achieve and a multitude of sometimes conflicting agenda appear to have resulted in an alternate outcome. These issues will be discussed in turn.

An important contributor to the tourism development process in the region was the State Government acting through its regional departments. The Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC) is a state government agency responsible for promoting the social and economic development of the wheatbelt region. The WDC had played a significant role in writing funding applications for concepts devised by the DWFG. However, tourism development was considered a minor aspect in the context of the WDC's overall role. For this reason, in 2000 the board had indicated that WDC staff should allocate more time to priority areas. These were primarily electricity and communication infrastructure, leaving tourism development to agencies such as Tourism WA and other tourism groups. The combination of the DWFG reaching its perceived limits in expertise and the WDC wishing to scale down its involvement in tourism development provided the motivation for employment of a full-time tourism development officer and, with the assistance of the WDC, the DWFG successfully applied in 2000 for funding. A tourism development officer was subsequently employed in 2001 on a fifteen month contract as a means of furthering the development of tourism in the region on a professional basis.

The primary role of the development officer was the administration of tourism related development activities, media liaison, and promotion of the region around Dryandra as a tourism destination (Sanders, 2003). During this time, some representatives considered the DWFG's role became largely redundant. It was seen to evolve into a forum for progress reports relating to the development officer's activities. This was rather ironic, given that the

DWFG employed the tourism development officer in order to further their capabilities. During this time, the planning and construction of Barna Mia had moved into its final phase, leaving the DWFG without a tangible major tourism project on which to focus. This perceived lack of purpose in the group coincided with the withdrawal of the Chamber of Commerce and Narrogin Business Enterprise Center representatives. Other community representatives also withdrew their voluntary involvement apparently along the same premise of having little to offer.

As the DWFG community membership decreased, two of the shire members, Williams and Wandering, also decided to withdraw from the group altogether, reducing Dryandra Country from seven LGAs to five. While it is not clear exactly why Williams decided to break away, the remaining shires perceived that Williams had 'betrayed' them in an attempt to 'go it alone'. Representatives of the DWFG suggested that Williams had always tried to link in with the areas toward the west coast that were already established as tourism destinations rather than toughing it out with the Dryandra Country shires. In a sense, this breakaway from the DWFG appeared inevitable as, unlike all the other LGAs, Williams lies across the main tourist and commercial travel route between Perth and Albany. The Town of Williams is also the halfway point between Perth and Albany, meaning many travelers and tourists stop to refuel or rest. The high level of through traffic has enabled the establishment of the 'Woolshed', a tourist oriented facility in the town that is perceived to attract considerable visitation.

Williams further riled the remaining shires in the DWFG by successfully applying in 2003 to obtain a Tourism Western Australia (TWA) Network Visitor Center. Network visitor centers enable tourists to access information on destinations and make bookings directly from the region they are interested in visiting. The centres are considered important in raising the district profile. This is coupled with an assumption that these facilities bring economic benefits although this is as yet untested. The installation of a visitor network center requires the LGA in which it is to be installed to meet certain criteria within a tourism development context. This includes the establishment of a centralized visitor center and visitor center manager, something the DWFG shires did not have at the time. The establishment of the network center in Williams resulted in the TWA refusing Narrogin's later application to establish one for the Dryandra Woodland shires. The main reason given was that Narrogin's close proximity to Williams (30km east) obviated the need for it to be a network center.

Williams was therefore perceived not only as a trouble-maker for withdrawing from the DWFG but was also considered to have undermined the development of tourism in Narrogin and the shires. The establishment of a center in Narrogin was viewed as a vital step in furthering tourism development in the Dryandra area as highlighted in the final report of the tourism development officer.

Wandering Shire was the second to withdraw its membership from the group. Discussion with the a Wandering Shire senior officer did not reveal any particular reason for withdrawing apart from a simple lack of interest in tourism development. There may be a number of factors contributing to Wandering's withdrawal. For example, Wandering town is located in an out-of-the-way place, even in comparison to the remaining Dryandra Country shires. The officer commented that they had about two tourists making enquiries at the information desk (located in the shire office on the main road through town) during 2002. This may indicate the shire considered tourism development centered on Dryandra Woodland would be of little consequence in terms of the potential benefits to Wandering. The officer also mentioned that he had served in a popular tourism destination in the north of Western Australia for many years and had little desire for being involved in tourism development issues after that experience.

Whatever the reasons, the remaining shires and Narrogin appeared not to view Wandering's departure with the same ire as that of Williams. This may be because Wandering's lack of interest may have acted as an inhibiting factor. In this sense, its withdrawal from the group could be viewed as a benefit to tourism development in the region. In contrast, Williams was and still is very interested and active in tourism development. Consequently the withdrawal of Williams from Dryandra Country meant that not only had the region lost the potential positive tourism contribution of Williams, the shire may be subsequently viewed as a rival. Wandering was definitely not viewed as a tourism rival given its lack of interest in tourism and the apparently infinitesimal number of tourists frequenting the shire.

While the remaining shires in the group were interested in furthering tourism development in the region, there were still undercurrents of political tension. These became most obvious when the tenure of the tourism development officer ended and a state of the tourism industry report was produced. The central recommendation of this report was the centralization of all tourism management to the Narrogin Tourist Bureau, which would be renamed the Dryandra

Country Visitor Center. This was intended to simplify the complex structure of tourism development agencies and interest groups in the region. The plethora of groups involved in tourism development and lack of adequate communication created situations in which tasks or initiatives were duplicated and/or did not take advantage of the best available skills or knowledge in the region. For example, certain community members took the initiative of creating tourism promotional brochures without consulting other members. This resulted in, according to non-involved stakeholders, numerous publications that often replicated or left out information or was of questionable quality. The number of tourism related publications also created difficulties for the CALM regional office that had to decide where to publish promotional material for Barna Mia with their very limited budget. Centralization of tourism development management was a means toward ensuring better quality control and minimizing replication. It would also provide a single point of contact for operators such as CALM that have little time allowance for promotion of tourism, meaning the promotion of Barna Mia would be more effective.

Despite the apparent advantages, total centralization of all tourism related management was not carried through. The shires preferred to retain their visitor centers and the control they have over the content and dissemination of tourism information. The significantly greater critical mass of Narrogin was perhaps perceived as a threat owing to the likelihood that Narrogin would receive most of the tourists and associated benefits. While tension relating to this issue was not overtly expressed, the concern was evident during discussions with shire representatives. Discussion with Pingelly representatives revealed concerns that the tourism development process may result in most tourism related benefits bypassing the smaller, less resourced shires. This was also based on the geographic location of Pingelly some distance away from Dryandra Woodland and any potential tourist access routes by road. Pingelly viewed tourism development in Dryandra to be more beneficial to Narrogin and Cuballing, the areas immediately adjacent to the woodland, as tourists were required to pass through these areas as a means of access. This was perhaps evidence of a stand by the shires against the already dominant role Narrogin played in regional affairs. It was interesting to note that Narrogin Town agreed to renaming its tourist bureau the Dryandra Country Visitor Center despite its dominant role in the region. This seems to represent a unilateral expression of commitment by Narrogin to a regional approach to tourism development.

Meanwhile, Back at Barna Mia...

Nestled amongst the political intrigue and bureaucratic machinations of Dryandra Country, the operation of Barna Mia, the tourism icon, was not going entirely to plan. The facility was designed along the lines of an ideal captive wildlife tourism attraction. During its first year of operation, Barna Mia received approximately 1000 visitors, with 800 visiting during the survey period. Judging by the very high satisfaction levels of visitors and positive comments evident in 2003 survey data it did indeed seem to be a near perfect attraction (Tables 2 & 3).

The survey data indicate a mean overall satisfaction rating of 3.75 (where 1 = very low satisfaction and 4 = very high satisfaction) with a range between 3 and 4. Mean satisfaction ratings for specific aspects of the experience revealed similar results though the range varied more widely

Table 2: Mean satisfaction rating data according to surveyed Barna Mia visitors

Aspect of Experience	N	Satisfaction Rating			
		Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Overall satisfaction	85	3.75	0.47	3	4
Meeting the guide at Old Mill Dam	82	3.54	0.76	2	4
Driving to Barna Mia	81	3.44	0.72	2	4
Arrival at Barna Mia	82	3.57	0.73	1	4
Presentation before walk	83	3.70	0.58	2	4
Other information in building	80	3.40	0.59	2	4
Guided walk	84	3.77	0.46	2	4
Stopping at feeding stations	84	3.73	0.58	2	4
Post walk refreshments	78	3.45	0.81	1	4

Table 3: Categorised reasons associated with overall satisfaction rating of Barna Mia experience (n=82)

Response Category	No.	%
Strong educational emphasis	33	40.2%
Opportunity for viewing rare animals	27	32.9%
Friendly/informative guide	23	28.0%
Seeing animals in natural habitat behaving naturally	19	23.2%
Close proximity of animals	14	17.1%
Evidence of wildlife conservation effort	12	14.6%

The survey data indicated a mean overall satisfaction rating of 3.75 (where 1 = very low satisfaction and 4 = very high satisfaction) with a range between 3 and 4. Mean satisfaction ratings for specific aspects of the experience revealed similar results though the range varied more widely

The most common highlights of the experience, according to survey respondents' written comments, were: the strong emphasis on education; the close encounters with rare marsupials in 'their own habitat'; the opportunity to have an 'intimate' small group experience with a knowledgeable and friendly guide. All of these responses reinforced the theory of the ideal wildlife tourism attraction extolled by the literature and Barna Mia fitted the bill perfectly. At the individual attraction scale, Barna Mia was the quintessential captive wildlife tourism experience.

Unfortunately, Barna Mia as the regional tourism development stimulant was not fairing so well. It seems that several factors conspired to stymie the Dryandra Country benefits Barna Mia was supposed to create. A major part of the problem was that the operator, CALM, could not function effectively as a tourism promotion and marketing agency because tourism is not fore-grounded in its mandate. This was compounded by the complex tourism development structure in Dryandra Country. The duty statements and resourcing of CALM staff in regional offices means very little time is spent on tourism oriented matters. This time

restriction plays out in relation to wider issues of tourism policy and planning as well as in the relationships to other stakeholders. An anecdote involving a LGA chief executive officer and CALM district office in Narrogin provides an excellent example.

The chief executive officer (CEO) had decided that Barna Mia would benefit from additional promotion to tourists and local residents. He contacted CALM with a proposal to sell merchandise from the LGA visitor information desk (in the Shire Offices) and have his staff wear T-shirts displaying the Barna Mia logo. CALM responded with mild interest but did not follow-up the issue. This discouraged the CEO who thought that the CALM was not interested in his idea. It also created confusion in his mind as to the agenda of CALM in managing what was supposedly a tourism icon, designed to benefit neighboring shires in the region. Discussion with staff at the CALM district office subsequently revealed that they were very interested in co-operating with shire offices to promote Barna Mia. The ideas had been taken on board but staff simply had not had the time to follow-up with the CEO. This was largely due to the primary responsibilities of staff as part of a natural area conservation agency taking precedence over tourism development issues. Thus, such activities must be carried out once all other tasks have been completed. Given that CALM staff have considerable workloads, tasks secondary to the core role often take time to be addressed. The misunderstanding that occurred between the shire CEO and CALM was primarily that the mandate of the organization responsible for the tourism icon, Barna Mia, is as a natural area conservation and management agency, not a tourism development agency.

The lack of time allocated to tourism management issues also resulted in CALM running Barna Mia effectively as an isolated attraction. CALM had not integrated it not only into the Dryandra Country product as discussed above but also on a smaller scale with the Dryandra Woodland product. This was reflected in many ways. For example, the survey data revealed that the holiday village in Dryandra Woodland was a major potential source of visitors for Barna Mia. Tours of the facility are booked through the Narrogin CALM district office by phone. However, the village has very poor communication infrastructure with limited mobile phone coverage and one public phone that works, on occasion. This means that people staying at the village either use the village caretakers' phone, hope for the best with the public phone or drive the 27km into Narrogin to make a booking for an experience that is actually based in the very place they are staying. While CALM has little control over the

communication infrastructure, the booking situation is a symptom of a lack of integration of the Barna Mia product with the Dryandra Woodland product. The booking issue could be easily overcome by having a CALM visitor center or office in the woodland village or nearby. Package deals could be devised that include a stay at the village and a tour of Barna Mia.

The lack of emphasis on tourism management in the structure and function of CALM was also evident in the business plan written for Barna Mia by the Regional Office (CALM, 2001). The plan appeared to be written in a manner such that the expectation of Barna Mia as a tourist attraction could not match the reality. For example, for the profits levels forecast to flow into the LGAs, Barna Mia would have to function as a mass tourism destination. This was to be achieved by tapping into the lucrative coach tours that currently bypassed Dryandra Country on their way to a major tourist attraction (Wave Rock) to the northeast. The reality was that the design of Barna Mia was based on small group, niche market experiences and the coach tours were on such a tight schedule they were unlikely to detour so as to stop at Barna Mia.

Even if the coach tour companies added Barna Mia to their itinerary, a coach load of fifty people could simply not be physically accommodated and would compromise the attractiveness of the facility as a tourism experience. The physically restricted design meant that Barna Mia could comfortably cater for a maximum of fifteen people per tour and one tour per night. It was noted that the number of complaints by Barna Mia visitors rose and the level of satisfaction declined when group sizes of 16 individuals or more were permitted on a single tour night. Consequently, the small scale of Barna Mia in terms of the number of tourists it can accommodate on any given night probably means it may not provide the significant influx of tourist numbers and associated revenue to the region hoped for in the business plan. This demonstrates a lack of 'fit' between the tourism facility design and experience with the planned operation of the facility and projected economic benefits.

Other issues also cropped up in visitor comments and researcher observations in relation to CALM as the sole manager of Barna Mia and Dryandra Woodland. One such issue is the lack of adequate directional signs both in Dryandra Woodland and in the region as a whole. Barna Mia was purposefully built in an undisclosed and unsignposted location to minimize the risk of vandalism, theft and threats to the safety of the rare animals living there. This strategy

indicates a greater emphasis on wildlife conservation than to the tourism potential.. However, the conservation agenda may still be achieved through alternate pathways that accommodate, rather than stifle, tourism development. A tour of the facility requires a fairly complex arrangement where visitors meet the guide at a location near the Village and are led in vehicle convoy to Barna Mia through various locked gates. While the lack of signs indicating the location of Barna Mia itself is a conscious management strategy, there are also no signs to indicate the way to the meeting point or to identify the meeting point itself. Consequently, visitors trying to navigate their way to meet the guide in semi darkness were unsure of where they were going or if they were in the right location when they got there. While individually, these issues may seem minor, collectively they represent an organisation that is not structured to function as a tourism management agency. In addition, the conservation mandate appears to work, at least in part, in a mutually exclusive relationship with tourism development. The issue seems to be that CALM is the sole operator and manager of the central iconic attraction of a tourism development region but does not view itself as a tourism management agency.

Lessons Learnt

It would appear that construction of a theoretically ideal captive wildlife tourism attraction in a regional area with little obvious tourism appeal does not automatically ensure success of the operation or bring benefits to the associated communities. This relates directly to Parr's (1999) comments regarding the generally low success rate of tourism nuclei installed as a means for growing tourism visitation. This results from a false assumption, as evident in the Dryandra Country study, that physical infrastructure automatically translates into economic and social benefits. In the context of the factors for success outlined by Prideaux (2002), lack of adequate business planning, promotion and marketing appears to have contributed to the poor performance of Barna Mia along with poor community support and a lack of infrastructure. This is partly evident in the manner in which facility is managed and operated as an isolated tourism facility, from a strongly conservation and education minded but tourism management weak stance in a sea of inadequate tourism infrastructure. On top of this, the design of Barna Mia that restricts it to small groups on limited tours could not possibly provide the boost to regional visitor numbers hoped for.

While the presence of key factors in a region may contribute to the success of a newly installed tourism attraction, in the context of this case study, there appears to be a catch 22

situation. Dryandra Country currently has a very low tourism profile; having poor tourism related infrastructure, a narrow range of accommodation and few obvious attractions. Such a region is difficult to promote as a tourism destination without some sort of distinctive attraction to create a 'hook' for the region. While Barna Mia is a technically perfect captive wildlife tourism facility and therefore should be an ideal attraction, its success is limited by lackluster management, conflicting agenda and a lack of tourism infrastructure and data in the region – most probably because the region has a low tourism profile. This case study presents an example of the 'build and they will come' philosophy. Unfortunately, it seems that the success of this exercise was hampered by a lack of resources, inconsistency in design and management, a complex network of tourism development stakeholder bodies and inadequate expertise in tourism planning that created a gap between what was intended and what was achieved.

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